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EDMUND BURKE'S *PRESENT DISCONTENTS*: POLITICAL PROPAGANDA OR A WORK OF POLITICAL SCIENCE?

Abstract: Edmund Burke, the ideologist of the Rockingham Whigs during the 1760s, published a pamphlet in 1770 – entitled *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents* – in which he analysed the difficult problems of the decade in domestic and foreign affairs. He determined what he saw as the root cause of the problems, and also suggested a solution to them. The primary aim of this essay is to describe the very special circumstances of the 1760s, to explain what motivated Burke in publishing this work, and to assess the significance of the pamphlet.

Key words: instability, political theory, propaganda, double cabinet, theory of party.

The American political theorist, Russell Kirk (1918-1994), who attributed special importance to the ideas of Edmund Burke, claimed that *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents* (1770) was

[A] manifesto of the Rockingham Whigs, but it was more. In essence, it was the first clear exposition of what "Western Democracies" now take for granted as the role of party, organized for the national interest. Previously, the Whig factions had acted without well defined principles, governed chiefly by personalities. [...] Burke meant the Rockinghams, at least, being the legitimate core of the Whigs, should aspire to something better. George III, he argued, was overthrowing the Constitution by "corruption" (monetary rewards to the King's Friends from the Civil List), and by resorting to a "double cabinet"— that is, in effect ignoring his formal ministry and ruling, actually, through private advisers and servants. The Constitution should be preserved by a party founded on principle, and prepared to spend many years, if necessary, out of office. This party would seek, through frankness and courage, to win the support of popular opinion (qtd. in Moore 2012).

The 1760s, the first decade of the reign of George III (1760-1820), was characterized by confusion and instability (for details see Borus 2004). The immature young king, who was only 22 years old when he came to the throne, was determined to liberate the Crown from aristocratic control by putting an end to the rule of the Whig oligarchy which had been in power since the Hanoverian succession of 1714. He dismissed the Duke of Newcastle and some other important Whig politicians and appointed his personal favourite and former tutor, Lord Bute, First Lord of the Treasury in 1762. The Scottish Bute became the target of political hostility, lost his nerve and resigned in April 1763 (see Borus 1997), after which four more short-lived ministries came to grief until the end of the decade. There were serious difficulties to deal with in foreign policy, too. At the end of the Seven Years' War Britain became diplomatically isolated after losing her only ally, Prussia, and the year 1765 saw the beginning of the conflict with the American Colonies. The 1760s was, at the same time, a decade of popular disturbances, industrial disputes and increasing extra-parliamentary radicalism.

Edmund Burke, the chief propagandist of the Rockingham Whigs, published his *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents* in April 1770, in which he put down all these problems to the system of favouritism. Burke asserted that the discontent of the 1760s was the direct consequence of the fact that Whigs, the natural leaders of society, were replaced in power by court favourites. That is, those who were influential with the people were replaced by those who were influential only with the Court. In order to avoid the consequences of sudden change from constitutional government to arbitrary government – Burke argued – the following scheme was devised. Behind the nominal ministers of the monarch there was to be a secret cabinet of Court favourites. In Burke's own words:

two systems of administration were to be formed; one which should be in the real secret and confidence; the other merely ostensible, to perform the official and executory duties of government. The latter were alone to be responsible; whilst the real advisors, who enjoyed all the power, were effectually removed from all the danger (Burke 1951:12).

The condition for the success of this scheme – which Burke called the *double cabinet* – was that Parliament had to be turned into an instrument for carrying out the commands of the secret cabinet. To this end *all connexions and dependencies among subjects were to be entirely dissolved* (Burke 1951:12), which means that the Court was intent on strengthening itself by breaking up parties, by detaching their leaders, and by making as many people dependent on the Crown as possible. This was to be achieved by influence, that is, by the distribution of rewards for supporting the Crown.

The questions which naturally arise are these: first, to what extent does Burke's explanation for the instability of the 1760s correspond to the facts, and, second,

what were Burke's aims with the publication of his *Present Discontents*? Was it really – as Russell Kirk argued – *the first clear exposition of what "Western Democracies" now take for granted as the role of party, organized for the national interest*? What follows is an attempt to answer these questions.

According to Burke, the double cabinet *benumbs and stupefies the whole executive power: rendering government in all its grand operations languid, uncertain, ineffective; making ministers fearful of attempting, and incapable of executing, any useful plan of domestic arrangement, or of foreign politics* (Burke 1951:37). Thus, the main result of the new system was feeble, unstable government which was the root cause of all the existing problems. Foreign courts and ministers, for example, treated England with contempt because they knew *that those shadows of ministers have nothing to do in the ultimate disposal of things* (Burke 1951:39). The reason why Britain lost her only ally, Prussia, was not this, of course, but that Frederick II managed to secure the alliance of Russia, which improved Prussia's opportunities. Prussia wanted to continue the Seven Years' War, while Britain wished to put an end to it. The contrary aims of the two countries were impossible to reconcile. Neither is Burke's argument valid for the supposed leniency and generosity towards France at the end of the war. Britain could have retained all her acquisitions if she wanted to, but she returned some of them to the French in the hope that this would appease them, and a future war could be avoided. Burke's assertion that it was the new system which alienated the American Colonies is equally unacceptable. The fact that the *Stamp Act* was first passed and then repealed by Parliament supports Burke's statement that the colonists knew *that no plan, either of lenity or rigour, can be pursued with uniformity and perseverence* (Burke 1951:40). The indecisiveness of the British government may have encouraged the American colonists to act, but the causes of the American Revolution were much more complex than that. Besides the remote economic causes of discontent and certain social and cultural factors the American Revolution was the result of nascent American nationalism and the changed circumstances after the Seven Years' War. The American Colonies, which no longer had to depend on the military protection of the Mother Country against the French and the Spanish, refused to be taxed by a Parliament in which they had no representation.

Burke maintained that the people themselves got infuriated by the perversion of the national institutions of government. The House of Commons, which should have been a control upon the executive in the interests of the people, was turned into an instrument of government in the hands of the Court. The Members of Parliament were now ready to support any ministry that the Court decided to appoint. The people, of course, were disgusted and in their discontent took to the streets. This argument is only partly acceptable for Burke completely ignored those causes of discontent which were of far wider import than the political ones – notably, the disruptive consequences of the war and the end of the war, as well as food shortages.

The government demobilised over 200,000 soldiers in 1763, most of whom joined the ranks of the unemployed. The National Debt rose to L98 million in 1761 and L131 million in 1767 as a result of the fact that the enormous costs of the war had been met by public borrowing (Bowen 1993:38-53). In order to reduce the debt, the government had to put up taxes and the poor were especially hard hit by the increasing excise duties on basic consumer goods. Poor harvests in the three consecutive years of 1766, 1767 and 1768 caused food shortages. It is ironic that Burke's friends in power had themselves set the stage for this crisis. In August 1765, the provision which allowed the importation of corn duty-free was repealed, and the government introduced a bounty on exported wheat instead. This meant that the corn which had been imported without duties could now be exported for a profit. Many corn merchants took advantage of this opportunity, and thus large quantities of wheat were shipped out of the country (Williams 1984:62).

It is clear, therefore, that the main causes of public disorder were economic ones. It would be a mistake, however, to ignore the political causes which Burke so strongly emphasized. The arrest and repeated expulsion of John Wilkes – the owner and editor of the *North Briton* the issues of which attacked Lord Bute and the Treaty of Paris – from the House of Commons against the will of the electors of Middlesex was a serious error, which could be exploited against the government. Burke could easily argue that the Court favourites intended *to put it into the power of the House of Commons to disable any person disagreeable to them from sitting in Parliament; and to take into their body, persons who avowedly had never been chosen by the majority of legal electors* (Burke 1951:52). Thus the House of Commons would be composed of men whom the people did not wish to sit in it, and in this way the Executive would be completely freed of popular control. Burke also declared that Wilkes was the object of persecution *for his unconquerable firmness, for his resolute, indefatigable, strenuous resistance against oppression* (Burke 1951:56). This was a common opposition argument at that time, which enabled Wilkes to pose as the champion of liberty against arbitrary power. It is unquestionable that many people took to the streets in support of John Wilkes, but we have to emphasize that the Wilkite movement would never have been successful without the economic causes of discontent, which Burke does not even mention.

Burke asserted that the only way in which social order and the balance of the Constitution could be restored was by the return of his party, the Rockingham Whigs, to power. The Rockinghamites, who organised their party after the disintegration of the Old Corps of Whigs in 1762, regarded themselves as the only legitimate heirs of the Whig creed. They were *the Whig Party* which had made the Glorious Revolution and framed the Constitution. They were the members of the great Revolution families to whom the Hanoverian kings owed their crown. They laid claim to government because they considered themselves the natural leaders of society, who alone had the necessary power and support for national leadership. Burke and the Rockinghamites did not challenge the king's prerogative

of appointing his ministers but they did insist that he had to choose politicians who were influential and popular with the people. George III, therefore, acted against the spirit of the Constitution and neglected his duty when he chose personal favourites instead of those who enjoyed the necessary influence and popularity. Why did the king neglect his duty? This had to be explained (Brewer, 1975:312-314).

Burke put the blame on the king's evil advisers who monopolised his confidence. Burke was shrewd enough to launch his attack not on Lord Bute, the detested Scottish favourite of George III, but on the *system of favouritism*, the secret cabinet behind the ministers' back. This is a major difference compared with the reasoning of another pamphlet written in 1765, entitled the *History of the Late Ministry*, the authors of which had put the blame on Lord Bute personally (Butterfield 1988:51-54). Bute probably continued to influence George III after his resignation in April 1763, but his influence came to an end in 1766, and the politicians of the day also knew this. What is more, Bute went on a continental tour in 1768, and he was still abroad when Burke' pamphlet appeared. Burke had to emphasize, therefore, that the secret system would have been devised and worked even *if the Earl of Bute had never existed* (Burke 1951:29). Burke managed to strengthen his argument also by insisting that the system was secret. Since it was secret, its non-existence was very hard to prove (Foord 1964:318-319).

Burke also had to account for the failure of the first Rockingham ministry, which was formed in July 1765 and lasted only twelve months. An attempt was made in the course of this year to restore constitutional government and the principles and policy of the Whigs, but the ministry was short-lived – Burke argued – because it was *violently opposed by the court faction* (Burke 1951:28). In reality, the administration was destroyed by its internal divisions and the inexperience of the ministers. As for Rockingham, he was – as Frank O'Gorman has noted – *undoubtedly one of the least well qualified of all eighteenth-century Prime Ministers* (1975:118). The internal divisions of the administration were caused by Rockingham's misconceived political strategy. Rockingham, who feared and probably exaggerated Bute's influence, decided to get rid of Bute's friends, but he was inconsistent in carrying out their proscription. In order to counterbalance the inexperience of his ministers he allowed some of Bute's friends to remain in their offices. The result of this short-sighted policy was inevitable. The dismissed politicians felt free to oppose the ministry in Parliament, while the Rockinghamites and those friends of Bute who kept their offices remained suspicious of each other. The last blow against the Rockinghamites was struck by William Pitt the Elder, who not only refused to join the ministry, but – during its last few months – systematically opposed it (Langford 1992:364-365).

Burke attributed the failure of all the other ministries of the 1760s to secret influence, too. Just as the Rockingham ministry, all these ministries had certain internal problems, but the root cause of instability in domestic politics was the discontinuance of the Whig-Tory antagonism that had sustained the old political order. The Whigs

had achieved coherence by defining themselves against the Tory party. After the disappearance of the Tory party in the mid-1750s, there was nothing to keep the Whigs together, and the party broke down into a number of groups. It was only the Pitt-Newcastle war coalition that saved the party from disintegration until 1762. When Newcastle was forced to resign in that year, the Whig patronage system fell apart, and until 1770 it was impossible to form a stable administration (Holmes 1993:277).

It must be noted that the theory of secret influence was not Burke' invention, but deduced from the political experience of the leading Rockinghamite politicians. This means that Burke simply adopted the belief in secret influence, since he himself was not one of the leaders of the party. Rockingham needed Burke for he had qualities which Rockingham did not possess. But Burke' services were never rewarded by a cabinet office or a place in the innermost circle of the party. Burke, who was of middle-class origin, never resented this. He was content to serve the great Whig lords. He was glad to act as their mouthpiece. *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents*, which was circulated among the party leaders before its publication, was not the expression of Burke' own ideas and opinions. It was much more than that. It was a party manifesto, the full expounding of the Rockinghamite creed (Harris 2012; O'Gorman 1975:259-261).

The most important component of this creed was the theory of party, which was a response to the 'discontents' and the political difficulties of the Rockingham Whigs. Between 1765 and 1769 the Rockinghamites agreed that the only solution to their own problems and to those of the nation was the organisation of a party, which was based on principles. Burke defined party as *a body of men united, for promoting by their joint endeavours the national interest, upon some particular principle in which they are all agreed* (Burke 1951:81). For Burke party was a defence against tyranny, a vehicle for ousting corrupt politicians from positions of power. *When bad men combine, the good must associate* – he wrote – *else they will fall, one by one* (Burke 1951:77). The *Present Discontents* contains political and historical justifications, which Burke summed up with reference to the Whigs in the reign of Queen Anne:

They believed no men could act with effect, who did not act in concert; that no men could act in concert, who did not act with confidence; that no men could act with confidence, who were not bound together by common opinions, common affections, and common interests (Burke 1951:80).

It was Burke's aim to justify organised opposition against the king's ministers, and to secure its leadership for the Rockingham Whigs by emphasizing the superiority of their principles over those of the other opposition groups. Burke had to controvert the widespread eighteenth-century view that all political parties were factions. Previous apologists of organised opposition had considered all parties factions, and they tolerated them only as temporary expedients which could cease

once the misgovernment was rectified. Burke, on the other hand, argued that party ought to be a permanent feature of politics, and that party organisation should continue after gaining power as well (Burke 1951:81; Brewer 1971:491; Brewer 1975:194-195). When party was strong, those who were out of office would be less liable to seduction by government patronage. Also, true party would concentrate opposition within Parliament itself and thus prevent it from transforming into popular radicalism (Seaman 1981:333).

Burke defended party in all its forms. This, however, did not mean that he wanted to legitimate all political combinations, or that he advocated a party system. In any case, the only political combination, which was in accordance with Burke's definition of party in 1770, was that of the Rockingham Whigs. Burke expressed his theory of party in general terms, which appear to give it universal application, but in reality he had only his own party in mind. He did not anticipate a two-party or multi-party system. The *Present Discontents* was not – as Carl B. Cone has argued – *a forecast of parliamentary government* (1957:195). Burke did not predict Britain's nineteenth-century constitutional development. All he anticipated was the triumph of his own party which could restore the political circumstances of George II's reign: the unquestioned rule of the Whigs (Foord 1964:318; O'Gorman 1975:262; Brewer 1975:194).

In order to pave the way for his triumph, to secure the leadership of the opposition, Burke had to explain why the Rockinghamites deserved more support than other opposition politicians. The great rival of the Rockinghamites was William Pitt, Earl of Chatham. Chatham was a patriot who owed allegiance to no group or politician but the Crown. He was a politician who acted only according to his own convictions. He never made an effort to organise connexion, but he was so popular that there were always many politicians who supported him. Burke's idea of party was an attack upon Chatham's anti-party attitude. Chatham took up a position – according to Burke – in which he could not perform his duty. He emphasized that it was only by the combined opposition of a party that the system of secret influence could be defeated (O'Gorman 1975:263; Foord 1964:306-307; Burke 1951:77).

In conclusion we can say that Edmund Burke's *Present Discontents* is a pamphlet, which appears to be more significant at first reading than it actually is. The lofty and elaborate quality of the exposition and the generalities in it have deceived generations of historians, politicians and political theorists. Special references have been made to this pamphlet on the grounds that its advocacy of party was novel. Burke, however, did not think in terms of a party system and, therefore, did not advocate it. His primary aim was to make people believe that there was a system of secret influence, which was the cause of all the discontents, and that this system could be defeated only by a party. The party Burke had in mind was his own: the political combination of the Rockingham Whigs. *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents* was a piece of political propaganda and not a work of political science (Foord 1964:316; 320-321).

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